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THE PROCESSION OF NEHEMIAH

NEH. 12:31-39

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Did Nehemiah's procession at the dedication of the wall march upon the wall or inside the wall or outside the wall? The interest of commentators has centered upon the location of the different gates and towers along the route of the procession and has for the most part ignored these questions. They are not, it is true, of any great importance. Yet the answer to them involves a discussion of the precise force of the two prepositions **ל** and **על**, which is of some interest, and the questions themselves demand a more adequate treatment than is usually accorded to them.

The progress of the procession is described in the following terms:

First Company, vs. 31, 37

v.21 ואעלה את-שרי יהודה מעל לחומה ואעמידה שתי תורות
 [והאח]ת הלכת לימין מעל לחומה לשער האשפת
 v.37 ועל שער העין ונגדם עלו על-מעלות עיר דויד ----
 במעלה לחומה מעל לבית דויד ועד שער המים מזרח

Second Company, vs. 38, 39

v.38 והתורה השנית ההולכת ל[ש]מאל ---- וחצי העם
 מעל להחומה מעל למגדל התנורים ועד החומה הרחבה
 v.39 ומעל לשער-אפרים ועל שער הישנה ועל שער הדגים
 ---- ומגדל חננאל ומגדל המאה ועד שער הצאן

It will be seen that **ל** is used six times, three times in the case of each procession, while **על** is used four times, twice of each procession. The description each time begins with **ל** vs. 31 and 38. **ל** is used three times in connection with the wall, once in connection with the 'house of David,' once in connection with the Oven Tower and once in connection with the gate of Ephraim. **על** is employed three times, in con-

nection with the Fountain Gate, Gate of the Old(?) and Fish Gate, and once in connection with 'the stairs of David.' It is probably also to be understood before the two towers, Hananel and Meah v. 39.¹

למעל and על are both used certainly of gates and probably of towers. The latter is used only of the stairs of David, the former only of the wall and the House of David. The two prepositions are used with such regularity that it would seem to be altogether probable that each has the same sense wherever it is used. At least this should be assumed till the contrary is proved. It is also important to note the governing verbs which they follow. Both למעל and על follow עלה, v. 31 (Hiph) and v. 37 (Kal), and both also follow הלך vs. 31 and 38.² These being the governing data, let us look at the exact force of the prepositions. It will be best, perhaps, to begin with the discussion of על.

(1) This preposition follows הלך in three instances.³ In itself על הלך may refer to walking on top of something. So at 2 S. 11:2, David walked on top of the roof. Cf. also 2 K. 6:6 where the king passed along (עבר) on top of the wall. While הלך על is not used of the wall in the present passage but only of the gates, yet there is no great difficulty in thinking of the procession as walking along the top of the gates also, if it was already on the wall. But if the two towers, Hananel and Meah, are to be thought of as subsumed under על, then על can scarcely have the sense of 'upon.' The procession might very well walk 'on top of' the gates but hardly 'on top of' the towers.

(2) In one instance על follows עלה, v. 37. If the procession is on the wall at this point על could not be translated 'on top of the stairs,' for the procession could not be on top of the

¹ Unless על is supplied before these towers they would have no grammatical connection in the sentence. On the other hand it is strange that the preposition is omitted. In every other case where a landmark along the route of the procession is referred to, it has its own preposition. It is noticeable that the grammatical construction of the reference to these same towers in 3:1 is also questionable.

² Emend ואָחַזת הַלֵּכָה v. 31 to תְּהַלֵּכָה v. 31.

³ על certainly follows הלך in vs. 38 f. and probably at v. 37a. V. 37a follows on vs. 31 f., vs. 33-36 being the addition of the Chronicler.

wall and on top of the stairs at the same time unless 'on top' meant 'at the head of' the stairs, and the stairs were thought of as leading to the top of the wall. There is no reason to believe that the stairs led to the top of the wall, but every reason to think that they were the stairs that led up to the city of David. Further 'on top of' in the sense of 'at the head of' would be expressed by a different phrase.⁴ If the procession was on the wall the **על** in this case might mean 'over' or 'above.' The stairs would then be thought of as running along under the wall. Such a use of **על** is of course frequent.⁵

If the procession was *not* on the wall, the **על** again cannot mean 'on the top of' in the sense of 'at the head of' the stairs, and for the same reason as before. The phrase is regularly translated 'They ascended *on* the stairs.' The verb **עלו** would then refer to the ascent of the hill (Ophel) and the **על מעלות** to the means by which they climbed the hill.⁶

This translation of the phrase is more than doubtful. The road or stairs by which one ascends any place is regularly regarded as the means and is therefore introduced by the preposition **ב**. Thus, if the reference is to the hill or ascent (**מַעְלָה**) up which one goes this is regularly expressed by **במעלה**. More particularly if the reference is to the stairs or ladder up which one goes this also is expressed by **ב**. Cf. Ex. 20:26 (**במעלות**); 1 K. 6:8 (**בלולים**); Ezek. 40:6, 23, 49. Cf. also more generally with **עלה** Nu. 20:19 (**במסְכָה**); ; Dt. 1:22 (**ררר-בָה**); Ne. 2:15.⁸ Even when the verb **הלך** is used, either the accusative or the preposition **ב**, not **על**, is the regular construction; cf. 1 K. 13:9; 18:6; Eccl. 10:3 and especially Ex. 14:29 and 2 S. 16:13. In the two latter examples one might have expected **על**. I have only found three instances of the use of **על** with **הלך** in the sense of 'upon' or 'along' the way.

⁴ I. e. with **ראש**, cf. Ex. 17:10; Nu. 11:40; Jd. 16:3; 1 K. 18:42; (2 K. 9:13 is dubious).

⁵ Mitchell takes **על** in this sense, *JBL*, 1903, 122 f.

⁶ So Stade, Bertheau-Ryssel, Siegfried, Oettli, Bertholet, Batten.

⁷ 1 S. 9:11; 2 S. 15:30; 2 C. 20:16; Is. 15:5 = Jer. 48:5.

⁸ Professor Mitchell (*l. c.*), who is the first apparently to cast doubt upon the usual translation of the phrase, refers only to Neh. 2:15 and 13. In v. 13 the accompanying verb is **צא**.

But even if they were not for one reason or another clouded with suspicion they would not justify the use of **על** with **הלך** in the sense of 'up' or 'along.'⁹ From the above examination it would seem very clear that **על מעלות** does not mean that the procession ascended the hill on the steps in the sense of 'by' the steps. This conclusion is confirmed when we examine the very next phrase **במעלה**. Here we have the exact idiom, which, in view of the above analogies, we would expect to express the idea of the means of ascent. But if **במעלה** signifies the means of ascent, then **על מעלות** does not do so. It is interesting to observe how those commentators who wrongly take **על מעלות** as expressing the means of ascent are at a loss what to do with **במעלה**.¹⁰ The conclusion would seem to be irresistible. If the procession was on top of the wall at this point, then **על מעלות** cannot mean 'on top of' or 'along,' but it might mean 'over' or 'above.' If the procession was on the ground **על** again cannot mean 'on top of' or 'along.' Nor in this case can it mean 'over' or 'above.' Some other sense must be found for it. But where was the procession, on the ground or on the wall? This leads us to the discussion of our other preposition **ל**.

The prepositional phrase **ל מעל** is found in the following instances: Gen. 1:7; 1 S. 17:39; 2 Ch. 13:4; 26:19; Ezek. 1:25; Jon. 4:6; Mal. 1:5.¹¹

(1) The phrase may mean 'over' in the sense of 'above.' So at Gen. 1:7; Ezek. 1:25; Jon. 4:6. In this sense it is hardly more than a pleonasm for **על**. It is parallel to **על** at Ezek. 1:25.

⁹ 1 S. 6:12; Jd. 4:9 and 5:10. In the first of these the construction with **על** varies with the construction with **ב**. The double expression is obscure and has been held to point to two sources. In the second case the line is almost certainly corrupted. In the third we are dealing with a metaphor.

¹⁰ Siegfried and Oettli give no explanation of it. According to Bertheau-Ryssel the ascent is formed by the stairs! Batten translates: 'They went up by the stairs of David, by the ascent of the wall.' His comment is: 'It would appear that the company followed the wall.' Since Batten thinks of the procession as on the wall from the point of departure and objects to the idea that it had left the wall at the stairs of David, he would seem to place the procession on the wall and on the stairs at the same time! Bertholet paraphrases: 'They ascend on the stairs there where the wall ascends.' This implies that **ב** means 'at'; cf. R. V.

¹¹ These are the only passages given in *BDB* and König, *Lehrgebäude*, II, 1, p. 314.

(2) Again it means 'upon', practically in the sense of 'on top,' 2 Ch. 13:4. Here again it is no more than a pleonasm for **על**. Cf. Neh. 9:3, 4 where **על** is used in precisely the same way, referring to the formal rising up (**רום**) on a certain place to make a speech. Slightly different is the use at 1 S. 17:39 where David girds his sword 'upon' his armor.

(3) Somewhat more doubtful is the meaning at 2 Ch. 26:19. Does it mean 'upon' i. e. 'on top of' the altar, or 'beside' it? As this appears to be the only instance of **מעל ל** in such a connection the safest procedure is to ask what **על** would mean if it were used here? The answer to this question is not altogether beyond dispute. Yet the probability is that it would mean 'beside' (cf. the use of **על** at Amos 9:1 and 1 K. 13:1, also Nu. 23:3, 6; Gen. 24:13)¹² and **מעל ל** is again best taken as a pleonasm for **על** in this sense.

(4) The phrase at Mal. 1:5 is usually interpreted by commentators to mean 'beyond,' i. e. 'over' the border in the sense of crossing over the border and so passing beyond it. A few commentators and most recently Professor J. M. P. Smith, translate by 'above.' The context is said to demand an emphasis upon God's greatness in Israel and not beyond Israel. I cannot feel that the context does demand such a limitation. And if it did, this phrase would not be the way to indicate it. We would rather expect the preposition **ב** meaning 'within' or 'through' the border. It so happens that only twice (thrice) does an Old Testament writer desire to express the idea of passing beyond the border. At Nu. 20:17 and probably at Ps. 104:9 this is done by means of the accusative. But at Joel 4:6 it is done by means of **מעל** without **ל**. Since **על** is used several times in the sense of 'upon,' i. e. 'at' the border (Nu. 20:23, cf. 33:37; 2 K. 3:21 and Ezek. 48:2 ff.), if the desire were to express the idea of 'beyond,' it would be very natural to use **מעל** in which the **מן** receives a certain independent force, 'away from upon' the border. Since **מעל ל** and **מעל** are at times practically synonymous (cf. Gen. 1:7 with 7:17) it would seem best to take **מעל ל** at Mal. 1:5 in the sense of 'beyond.' But what, now, does it mean in Nehemiah?

(1) Does **מעל ל** equal **על** in the sense of 'upon' and does

¹² So Nowack, Marti and Harper at Amos 9:1. Bertheau and Kittel give 'neben' at 2 Ch. 26:19. Curtis, ad loc., does not discuss the phrase.

Nehemiah wish to say at v. 31 that he led the processions up upon the top of the wall?¹³ To this view there are two fatal objections: (a) This meaning does not fit the phrase **מעל לבית דרור** v. 37. The procession cannot be thought of as marching along the top of David's house. Here the phrase must have another meaning. (b) The supposition that Nehemiah led them to the top of the wall conflicts with what is said of the direction of the first procession. It is agreed on all hands that the first procession traversed the southern half of the circuit of the walls. The wall on this circuit runs first to the east and then to the north up Ophel. But it is said that the first procession went *to the right*. Naturally one thinks of the procession turning to its right as it got to the top of the wall, provided, that it *was* on the top at all. But if they climbed the wall from the inside they would be facing south and *would turn to the left, not to the right*. In order to do justice to 'the right' one must suppose that they climbed the wall from the outside. Then they would be facing North and would turn to the right. But how could they climb the wall from the outside? People did not build stairs on the outside of their walls. The only way I see to get rid of this difficulty is to take 'right' and 'left' in the sense which they at times have of 'south' and 'north.' But this involves putting the point of departure sufficiently far north on the western wall to justify the statement that they went south. It is true that some scholars have advocated a point somewhere near the Jaffa gate as the point of departure, but it is far more probable that the Valley Gate near which the procession seems to have gathered is in the southern wall overlooking the Valley of Hinnom. Accordingly the translation 'South' and 'North' is improbable.¹⁴ Thus **ואעלה מעל ל** v. 31 does not mean that Nehemiah led the procession to the top of the wall.

(2) At Jonah 4:6 we have almost the exact phrase found at Ne. 12:31. If we followed this suggestion of Jonah we would have to translate v. 31a: 'I led the princes of Judah up above the wall.' This cannot mean, as we have just seen, that he led it to the top of the wall, but only to some elevated position higher than the wall. In that case the procession would not be on the

¹³ So R. V., Keil, Reuss, Rawlinson, Batten.

¹⁴ Siegfried inconsistently translates by 'right' and 'north.'

wall at all.¹⁵ But will this view give a satisfactory explanation of the passage? (1) In the first place it will not easily fit the connection of **מַעַל ל** with the Oven Tower, v. 38. This tower is almost certainly to be placed somewhere in the western wall. It would be difficult to point out any place along the western wall where the procession would have been on higher ground than a tower, provided they were anywhere near the wall at all. (2) In the next place all these writers seem to put the procession inside the wall.¹⁶ They do this because at certain points the wall may be thought of as lower down on the slope of the hill. But as we have seen this will hardly answer for the Oven Tower nor indeed for any of the points mentioned on the western and northern wall. But a still greater objection to putting the procession inside the wall is the fact that the first procession turns to the right. It is curious how this difficulty is ignored by practically all writers. Only Bertheau seems to feel that there is something the matter here, for he makes the procession turn around in order to face the temple! If my friend, Professor Torrey's, views of the idiosyncrasies of the Chronicler were whole-heartedly admitted, we might suppose that the poor old gentleman did not know his right hand from his left. But this passage, I still believe, belongs, in its original form, to the Nehemiah memorabilia. Accordingly it seems as impossible to translate **מַעַל ל** by 'above' or 'over' as it is to translate it by 'upon' or 'on top of.' Is there any way out of the difficulties in which we find ourselves?

I suggest that the two processions went outside of the wall. (1) This view is favored by the general probabilities of the case. It was evidently the intention to follow the course of the wall. But to do this on the inside of the wall would be next to impossible. The procession would be impeded by the various build-

¹⁵ This seems to be the view of Siegfried, Bertheau-Ryssel and Bertholet. They follow the suggestion of Guthe (*ZDPV*, VIII, 279 ff.) that **יָל** and **מַעַל ל** must be distinguished, the latter referring to a position at a certain distance from the wall, while the former indicates that the procession passed close by the landmarks mentioned. Siegfried translates **מַעַל ל** consistently by 'oberhalb.'

¹⁶ This is done expressly by Siegfried and Bertholet and impliedly by Bertheau-Ryssel. Bertholet says 'the point of departure was higher than the wall, probably behind it on the hill on whose edge they marched.'

ings that often abutted on the wall. It is not possible, now, to follow the wall of Jerusalem on the inside without many deviations from its course. But to follow its course on the outside *except at one point* would be comparatively easy. (2) This view is confirmed by the direction of the first procession to the right. This can only be understood if the procession were on the outside of the wall. (3) If the processions were going on the outside of the wall the true significance of v. 37 can now be understood. The wall up Ophel follows the extreme eastern edge of the hill and the hill is here very precipitous. The recent Jewish excavations on Ophel show how very precipitous it was in places. Accordingly at this point the procession could scarcely have passed along outside the wall. They had the choice of passing into the city and ascending by the stairs of David or following the wall itself along the top. V. 37 says distinctly that they took the latter course.¹⁷ The נָגַד will then emphasize the fact that they went straight ahead right up the wall instead of going either on the outside or the inside. They were probably prevented from following the stairs of David either because they wished to keep as near to the wall as possible or (cf. Mitchell) the débris may have collected here to such an extent that it was difficult for them to ascend except on the wall itself (cf. 2:14).¹⁸ If this view is adopted it follows at once that עַל in the phrase עַל מַעְלוֹת cannot be translated 'upon' or 'along.' It could be translated, as Mitchell suggests, by 'over.' But this meaning will not fit the other places in which it is used. Therefore (4) I suggest that it should be translated 'past.' This agrees with the emphatic נָגַד. They go right past the stairs which was the natural way up the hill and ascend by the wall itself. But if עַל means 'past' here, this meaning will fit the other three instances in which it is used. It probably has also the additional

¹⁷ This is the view advocated by Mitchell who suggests that בַּמַּעְלֵה may refer to the stepped character of the wall which is found at times even in the present form of the wall.

¹⁸ This view of the meaning of נָגַד seems to me preferable to the usual view that at this point the procession left off following the direction of the wall and went straight up the stairs of David (Stade, Siegfried, Bertholet), for this view, as we have seen, involves an incorrect translation of the phrase עַל מַעְלוֹת. Batten gives up the explanation of נָגַד.

nuance 'in front of' if the procession is outside the wall.¹⁹ If this meaning be once allowed for על, it is probably to be assigned to מעל ל as well. We have seen how מעל ל is often only a pleonasm for על. The meaning 'past' at the same time with the implication 'in front of' would fit every case in which both prepositions are used in the present passage, and we would not have to resort to the supposition that the prepositions, though used in the same connection, are used in entirely different senses.²⁰ The only other phrase requiring an explanation is ואעלה, v. 31. From where did Nehemiah lead his procession up? If they were on the outside of the wall the answer is, necessarily, from the Valley of Hinnom. This is not at all unnatural if the point of departure is, as is usually supposed, from the Valley Gate, which almost certainly takes its name from the Valley of Hinnom.

Whether I have correctly solved the puzzling questions which arise in connection with the routes of Nehemiah's two processions, I have at least tried to formulate the problems somewhat more precisely than they appear to have been formulated hitherto, and I shall be glad to receive any confirmation or correction of the positions advanced. May many of us be permitted again and at no distant day to return to Jerusalem as in the happier days of the past and 'walk about Zion, go round about her, number the towers thereof and mark well her bulwarks.'

¹⁹ על often means 'beside' with verbs of rest, sometimes with the suggestion of 'in front.' Cf. examples given above and also Amos 7:7(?) with חומה; Cant. 7:5 (with שער) and especially Prov. 14:19 (with שער) where it is parallel to לפני. It is also found with עבר a number of times, cf. 1 K. 9:8; Jer. 18:16. The writers who draw the distinction between על and מעל ל usually give to the former the meaning of 'am' or 'vorbei' or 'vorüber.' Cf. especially Klaiber *ZDPV*, III, 208. It must be admitted, however, that there seems to be no other instance of this precise meaning of על either with הלך or עלה. At Ex. 2:5 עליד is used. But this is the standing phrase to indicate a river bank. Cf. Nu. 13:29 [על הים]; Jer. 46:6; Dan. 10:4.

²⁰ Batten translates מעל ל 'upon the wall, above the Oven tower, beyond the gate of Ephraim'(!) and על 'unto the fountain gate (in spite of the fact that 'unto' in this passage is only indicated by ער), by the stairs of David, past the Old Gate.' This seems to me to be playing fast and loose with these prepositions.